

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE A-7NEW YORK TIMES  
11 March 1987

# HONDURAS DOWNS C-47 CARGO PLANE

By RICHARD HALLORAN

Special to THE New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 10 — Honduran Air Force jets shot down a cargo plane that flew from neighboring Nicaragua into Honduran airspace on Monday night.

Officials said today that they suspected the plane was involved in smuggling narcotics.

The Honduran Government informed the United States of the incident, American officials here said today, but they added that the message from Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, lacked details.

Reports said Honduran jet fighters shot down the plane at 11:30 P.M. after the pilot refused to identify himself and land. The plane reportedly crashed near Cucuyagua in Copán Province, nearly 100 miles from Tegucigalpa.

## No Survivors

Sources in Central America said that the pilot of the plane was an American and that as many as three others may have been aboard. No one survived.

They also suggested that the flight of the plane had originated not in Nicaragua but from South America, possibly Colombia.

An official close to the investigation in Honduras said the victim identified so far "had known connections to drug activities in the past." The plane itself has also been under investigation for drug-related activities, he said.

Officials here and in Central America thought the plane, a C-47, may have been on a drug-smuggling run. Those aircraft, built during World War II, have been used before for drug smuggling in that region, the officials said. Colombia is the world's largest producer of cocaine and also produces marijuana.

## Other Possibilities

Although officials here said they thought the plane was on a drug run, they did not rule out other possibilities pending more information. They said it could be a Sandinista aircraft sent to drop supplies to Salvadoran or Honduran guerrillas, or on reconnaissance.

American officials have said that Salvadoran leftist guerrillas supported by the Sandinistas have recently taken refuge in Honduras to escape pursuit by Salvadoran Government troops. They have also said the Sandinistas have been encouraging small bands of Honduran guerrillas to become more active against the Honduran government.

Not mentioned by the officials was the possibility that the plane was linked to the United States Central Intelligence Agency. That agency uses a dirt airstrip at Cucuyagua as a supply point.

Last October, another plane with a cargo of cocaine overflying Honduras was forced to land in La Ceiba.

Other Government officials, reconstructing Monday's flight from the skimpy details they had, said the plane appeared to have come from Colombia on a drug mission and to have stopped on the island of San Andreas, a hot, dry island owned by Colombia in the Caribbean. From there, the officials said, the plane appeared to have headed west over Nicaragua and Honduras on the way either to El Salvador or Guatemala. They said it had been spotted by Honduran radar and that Honduran planes had been sent to force it down.

## Radio Contact Was Attempted

The Hondurans appeared to have tried to make radio contact with the twin-engined, propeller-driven C-47, which is the military version of the Douglas DC-3. When the pilot of the C-47 failed to respond and ignored Honduran commands to land, his plane was shot down, according to officials here.

The terrain in that part of Honduras where the plane crashed is wooded and mountainous, with many deep ravines and steep cliffs. Most roads there are unpaved and many are difficult to negotiate because they are filled with boulders and furrowed with gullies.

The Nicaraguan Government has denied any knowledge of the plane downed Monday night.

Recently, according to American officials, the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua has dispatched Russian-built Mi-24 helicopter gunships into Honduran airspace to attack the contras. The Soviet Union was said to have sent almost 50 of those gunships to Nicaragua in recent years.

Neither Honduran nor Nicaraguan officials have acknowledged those forays, the officials said. The Hondurans hope such attacks will not be repeated if they don't make a public issue of them, while the Nicaraguan Government wishes to avoid giving the contras the importance that attacks by advanced helicopters might signify, the officials said.